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5/16/89: To Serve the People

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This piece is excerpted from the manuscript of Philip J. Cunningham's forthcoming book, Tiananmen Moon, part of an [on-going China Beat feature of excerpts from Cunningham's book](#). Interested readers can see more at [Cunningham's website](#).

By Philip J. Cunningham

The term "democracy" was gaining a certain purchase on the popular imagination, though it was not without its slippery side. Given the predictable confusion about what the students were really up to, given the abstraction and ambiguity inherent in political term *minzhu*, particularly within the confines of a communist society which fancied itself to be democratic in a roundabout sort of way, "democracy" meant very different things to different people. It had such a bafflingly wide range of meaning, it was so easily co-opted and distorted, that one could better appreciate the efficacy of a banal but concrete cry.

Thus "support the students" became one of those rare phrases, polished and spit out by the crowd, that a million voices could safely agree to say in unison.

SUPPORT THE STUDENTS!

The frictionless interactions I was enjoying with Bright, Jenny, Lily and other friends from Shida also bolstered my confidence, my sense of being part of a giant, magnificent sort of drama that had a role for everyone and anyone willing to step up on stage.

The spirit of the day permitted ample interaction of the sort I liked best. Not above, not below, just side by side with everyone else. No big fuss about obvious differences, nor any need to elaborate obvious commonalities, just people getting along. All afternoon I moved through the congregation feeling very much a person, and not much a *laowai*.

...

It was long after lunch hour but the kitchen staff continued to stand stoically on the grease splattered cement, tending boiling huge vats of broth, kneading dough and ladling out portions to impatient eaters, restoring the flagging spirits of tired protesters and nurturing the dehydrated bodies of sun-exposed men and women weary of foot. Cooks, cashiers and cleaners who toiled in low-rent, ramshackle shops such as this had no illusions about their social status. They were among the losers in Deng's new hybrid system of socialism mixed with capitalism.

Such work wasn't entrepreneurial, with all possible risks and benefits that entailed, but it was not much of a socialist sinecure either. They worked long hours for low pay in a job both physically demanding and accident-prone. Deng Xiaoping famously said to get rich is glorious but that was for other people, special people. The workers in the "iron rice bowl" trades could at best look forward to sipping tea and reading newspapers in between shifts, a life of low productivity punctuated by long stretches of boredom.

But the Wonton Place met the needs of cash-starved, dialect-shouting rural pilgrims visiting the capital, diners who might only dream about eating in Quan Ju De, where duck was served up according to social class, with VIP rooms for wining and dining foreign dignitaries such as Kim Il Sung, along with less efficiently air-conditioned rooms for local hotshots and, as a gesture to the hoi polloi, a fast food style canteen on the ground level where the tables, and floor, were never free of cigarette butts, discarded bones and duck bits.

Here, in contrast, the menu was simple and there was but one class of service; deliveries were made by bicycle and the coal-fired kitchen hummed along with a hardy functionality, so low-tech it could operate at full blast even during a black-out.

A worker in a food-stained white uniform takes a break from infernal heat of the kitchen, stepping outside to wipe her brow, then briefly survey the insatiable army that she was helping to feed. Transfixed by the enormity of the crowd assembling on the square, her eyes brightened with pride and amazement, as if it had just dawned on her that even she had a part to play in much the unfolding drama.



The words, "It is important for people like that to be here" came to mind. The neglected wageworker, who made a bare-bones living by slopping out soupy servings to day tourists on the edge of a plaza that memorialized revolutions past, was she not also an inheritor of the revolutionary tradition? The sudden upsurge in the spirit to "serve the people" was transformational.

The men and women in their soiled aprons were working class heroes, playing an appreciated role, feeding pass-by revolutionaries and slaking the thirst of the throng.

I had seen a similar transformation of kitchen crew and menial workers on campus, even the sassy rural attendants in the Insider Guest House, who, far from being critical of the students, were proud to be proximate to history in the making. The nervy defiance of the students, however opaque and abstract their goals might be in political terms, was seductive to bored ordinary folk, for it offered both spectacle and a hint of better things to come. Egalitarianism and self-sacrifice were back in circulation with a vengeance after a decade that saw socialist values eroded by a get-rich-quick mentality.

Bright finds me and hurries over just in time to help me carry our bowls of hot soup while Jenny looks for a seat. We thank the kitchen staff for the food they ladle out, and we are not alone in doing so, others too, express admiration for the way the kitchen crew efficiently filled so many hungry stomachs.

By a stroke of luck, two seats opened up just as we had resigned ourselves to eating on our feet. There was no table, but two sturdy stools were available along the railing on the edge of the earthen promontory. We swiftly took possession of the coveted seats, taking turns to rest our legs and greedily slurping down hot soup in full view of the Square.

The outdoor eating area of the Wonton Place was like a rough-hewn balcony, offering a rare unobstructed view of the drum flat plaza in front of us. Beyond the railing and a mass of entangled bicycles, a pent-up political procession unscrolled before our eyes.

Given the elevation of our humble perch, we could see not only the south to north pattern of flow of the demonstrators treading closest to us, but detect an equal and opposite movement clear across the Square where the other side of the human cyclone moved north to south.

We gobbled up the dumplings and savored the hot broth to the last drop. I was proud to have been a tiny cog in that giant rotating human clockwork out there but at the same time it was a relief to be a more or less autonomous individual again, a few paces apart from the hypnotic beat of other footsteps.

I needed space and distance to order my thoughts, a quiet timeout to jot down some notes. For some reason I found it hard to think in the midst of the crowd, it was as if some ancient communal subconscious ruled when I was walled in on all sides by thick human traffic; it was hard to reflect with any clarity from the inside out. But then again, I would not have much to reflect on afterwards, from the sidelines, had I not first lost myself on the inside. To me the two emerging sweet spots in a rotating vortex of protesters pushing a million were to be either in the center of the crowd or on its outer edge. There was a crunching intensity in one view, an aloof clarity in the other. The two poles were buffered by an in-between zone of halfhearted student agitators and partially politicized townspeople.

BBC's tussle with militant onlookers last night had been in just such an ill-defined location; tellingly it had taken place at a time of day when fears about a nocturnal crackdown were mounting.

This morning I had seen little such volatility or even the everyday tensions I normally associated with tight knots of people on the street, where loud arguments, even shoving matches and fist fights routinely took place in full public view. It was not so much ironclad discipline that enabled the crowd out there to enjoy such an unusual degree of freedom from untoward incident or petty fights, rather it was a kind of mass elation combined with a collapse of individual boundaries; the mass somehow pulled itself together and sedated itself.

Several times I tried taking pictures of the kinetic marching with my fixed lens Olympus, but only a wide-angle could do the broad panorama real justice, and even then, the result would be too static to convey the constant motion. I settled for a series of snaps in succession, thinking I might be able to fit them together like pieces of a puzzle later.

The spectacle of so many people in constant motion was so mesmerizing, the effect of delicious noodles and a warm beer on empty stomachs so soporific, that we lingered in our ringside seats overlooking the Square even after lunch hour ended. Eyes locked in a hundred yard stare, body

immobile with fatigue and slightly off balance from a touch of inebriation, I felt myself being tugged and transported back into the thick of it without lifting a finger. I was overwhelmed with a sense of awe and an ecstatic sense of well-being to see so many people moving together with so much spirit and so little friction. The Square had become a font of revolutionary renewal tempered, mercifully, by an all-encompassing harmony.

The marchers at Tiananmen moved to the drumbeat of the Chinese language hypnotically, almost in unison. Did the rhythmic repetition of slogans have a mantra-like calming effect? Or was it the simple unalloyed delight of the warm spring breeze that blew under the embrace of a blue sky? Or was it perhaps the cool, silvery light of a moon on the rise, daring to follow in the trail of the scorching sun. There was a communal joy in being part of something so much bigger than oneself, but there was also a rare assertion of self, the realization of a long-suppressed need to take the helm of one's life.

I crouched forward and leaned on the railing, the warm restorative broth and warm beer having some effect, not to mention the delayed onset of drowsiness from a sleepless night on the Square.

Although many of the things going on right before my eyes eluded easy intellectual comprehension, I was moved by the spirit of the day. It was thrilling to be in a nation waking up to a new dawn, it was empowering to witness the empowerment of the downtrodden. Something important was going on, touching all levels of society and I wanted to be close to the beating heart of it.

Tags: [1989](#), [6/4](#), [Philip J Cunningham](#), [Tiananmen](#), [Tiananmen Moon](#)